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ABSTRACT

Businesses are working with schools in ways that can affect every aspect of the education process. The most widespread form of business help takes place in the classrooms. School leaders need to be clear with themselves as to how much and what kind of involvement they want businesses to have in their schools. Business leaders can also help schools by actions in their own environment such as offering childcare at the workplace and allowing employees flexible schedules. Thirteen references are listed. (MLF)

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By Alan Baas

Business and education are two vital but different streams that feed American culture. Typically, business values and methods are more tangible — "product-oriented" — while education is concerned with less concrete goals such as helping our young become good citizens. Today, motivated by a need for an improved labor force, businesses are working with schools in ways that can affect every aspect of the education process. And educators, prompted by increasing conflicts between resources and goals, have been encouraging this involvement.

So far, business's participation has been relatively benign, but, judging from the wealth of literature on the topic, its role in education needs careful assessment.

What Are the Present Configurations of School-Business Cooperation?

"Partnerships" — a notion with roots in the volunteer programs of the fifties and sixties — have become the predominant type of school-business cooperation, according to the executive director of the National Association of Partners in Education (Daniel Merenda 1989). Most of these are still locally driven by volunteers who serve in classrooms under the supervision of school staff. Typically they are *not* focused on vocational education, though business support is often most effective in that area. Rather, they are aimed at "early intervention" in the educational process in an attempt to better provide "a sound general education" that will generate better educated workers.

Partnerships may be highly structured or very casual, depending on the types of intervention they are designed to achieve. Formalized partnerships occur more in urban situations. In suburban/rural areas, Dale Mann (1987) says, smaller districts simply may not have the "leadership resources" to organize formally. Often they don't want to muddy their funding strategies by drawing on resources from channels other than those already established.

How Extensive Is Business Involvement?

A U.S. Department of Education (1988) publication reports that by the end of the 1988 school year some 140,800 partnerships were involved with 24 percent of the public school population (9 million students). Small and medium-sized businesses accounted for 38 percent of the programs reported. Large businesses took care of 14 percent, and civic/service clubs took another 16 percent of the pie. The rest was divided among individuals, colleges, government agencies, organizations and foundations, and religious and special interest groups.

Many of the programs focused on math and science, with career awareness and civic education receiving the next greatest attention. Fewer concrete programs were found in reading, arts and humanities, drugs, dropout prevention, and assistance to the disadvantaged.

What Are the Advantages of Such Cooperation?

Schools are gaining much-needed pragmatic support as businesses come forward to donate or loan equipment and supplies and share employees and executives to help with school management. Industries and businesses are also opening their doors to help teachers upgrade or develop new skills and learn about the labor market in their fields. The most widespread form of business help still takes place in the classroom, where volunteers released from their jobs serve as visiting tutors. On occasion, businesses invite students to come to them for learning.

Partnerships give business people the chance to work directly to improve the skills of future entry-level workers (Michael MacDowell 1989). Also, a more concrete presence in the schools helps businesses improve their public image and increase understanding of their products and services.

Less tangibly, a greater sharing of ideas can take place among all sectors of the community. Business leaders are often community leaders; an intimate acquaintance with day-to-day teaching problems can help them provide more efficient support to school funding and policy issues. Similarly, by learning more about careers and real-world applications of the skills they encounter in school, students can make more informed choices about their futures.

How Can Schools Develop Successful Relationships with Businesses?

School leaders need to be clear with themselves as to how much and what kind of involvement they want businesses to have in their schools. Once they have done that, they should stick to common-sense action steps such as Charles Mykleby (1987) outlines:

Plan for long-term endeavors and identify the benefits to be gained by all participants. Set goals carefully and build task forces that represent different interest groups to help advise school boards on policy development. Refine these policies through frequent planning sessions. Be flexible and sensitive to the obligations of all participants. Be careful to provide for continuous, centralized communication and a monitoring and evaluation procedure to stabilize the process. Train both the volunteers from business and the educators who will be working with them. Explain what is expected and give teachers time to plan lessons with volunteers. Build teams and let them work out the details. Encourage site visits by teachers and students.

What about the Problem of Business Dominance?

Public schools have received many challenges in recent years concerning the quality of the students they are releasing into society. When a force as powerful as business moves into education territory, more controversy is inevitable.

Esther Schaeffer, senior vice president for policy at the National Alliance of Business (NAB), admitted recently in *Education Week* (Ann Bradley 1990) that there is "a little bit of role reversal . . . in that business is going to the schools with an agenda and wanting to figure out what needs to be done." On the same page, Amoco Corporation chair

Richard Morrow is quoted as asserting that the "challenge to corporate America is to provide leadership" regarding technological illiteracy in the work force. An NAB document by Frederick Edelstein (1989) calling for "major systemic change" reinforces this feeling of business people wanting to influence education.

Top executives such as Xerox's David Kearns (1988) side with the NAB position. When businesses have to teach basic skills to their new workers, they are "doing the schools' product-recall work for them," says Kearns. He urges business to "force the agenda for school reform" or "set its own," one "driven by market forces and accountability — unfamiliar ground for politicians and educators." Yet Kearns and other leaders also assert the need for both accountability and more local control on the part of teachers.

So far, while some business leaders may indulge in perhaps excessively biting jabs at education, their intent appears to be supportive of educators' retaining ultimate decision-making responsibility. More often, those jabs are directed at problems acknowledged by educators themselves — top-heavy administration, clumsy management systems, limited resources, and so forth — and seek to stimulate educational decision processes toward greater efficiency and clarity.

What Other Controversies Have Surfaced?

The possibility of business goals polluting the educational process is addressed at length and with passion by Michael Apple (1987), who warns about "the growing pressure to make the perceived needs of business and industry into the primary goals of the school." The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) also has stepped forward, arguing that any proposed involvement be consistent with defined educational values and objectives; respond to clearly understood educational needs; support rather than contradict existing educational messages; and be assessed by groups with different views as part of an ongoing review process.

"In structuring relationships with business," warns the ASCD (1989-1990), "educators should remember that the state requires students to attend school. This gives educators the responsibility of ensuring that the welfare of their students, rather than the special interest of any particular group, is promoted by school programs."

Business's interest in open enrollment offers some educators a more threatening red flag. Writing in a recent issue of *Barron's*, Michael Brody (1990) argues that "freeing parents to bail out of bad schools is the only mechanism that can compel them to change." He cites bills pending in half the nation's state legislatures concerning at least limited freedom for parents to decide which school their children will attend. A Minnesota school teacher, however, sees a different picture emerging. Judith Pearson (1989) argues that "educational benefits will be increasingly unequal under the open-enrollment plan."

What Does the Future Look Like?

Looking at 700,000-plus students dropping out each year, Mann sees little hope for "interim solutions." Nor does he see business partnerships as "levers of reform." Typically, he finds, businesses will relocate plants and purchase worker training programs more often than they will work on school reform. In the face of mounting pressures to recapture or at least train school dropouts, he, like Apple, has serious concerns about the development of an education-for-profit trend.

Ironically, while many writers worry about damage to our basic democratic principles, those same principles are often exercised vigorously as strongly motivated business leaders learn to work with similarly dedicated educators. It should be noted that business has had an unfair edge in that education has many publicly identified problems. A closer look at what business can do in its own environment is needed.

For example, giving employees flexible schedules or even allowances for time off can help parents become better involved in their children's activities. Similarly, affordable childcare at the workplace could improve children's readiness for school as well as expose them to work roles. Business leaders also need to look at the effects that lobbying to remove inventories from tax roles and sending jobs overseas have on graduates' employment hopes and motivations.

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